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United States
Department of
Agriculture



Food Safety
and Quality
Service

FSQS Consumer Inquiries: What? Where? How?

When you've got a question about the food you buy, not knowing where to go for information or how to complain only adds insult to injury.

There's no one answer to this problem, but if the product in question contains meat or poultry or if it is a product graded for quality by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, USDA's Food Safety and Quality Service can help.

If you are simply disappointed with how the product tastes or looks, you should direct your complaint to your local grocer or to the product's manufacturer.

But if your concern is with the safety or wholesomeness of a meat or poultry product, the truthfulness of its labeling, or the accuracy of its grade name, contact:

FSQS Consumer Inquiries
USDA
Washington, D.C. 20250

Or call: (202) 472-4485

Responsibilities To Consumers

By law, it is our responsibility to assure you, the consumer, that meat and poultry products sold in the United States or shipped abroad are safe, wholesome, and truthfully labeled. If you buy a food product that you feel doesn't meet these standards, you should contact us.

FSQS is also responsible for voluntary quality grading of meat, poultry, eggs, dairy products, and fresh and processed fruits and vegetables and related products such as jams and jellies. Producers and processors pay USDA to grade their products according to USDA standards and to apply official USDA grade names such as U.S. Choice, U.S. Grade A, or U.S. No. 1. If you buy a graded product and feel that the grade mark doesn't accurately reflect the quality of the product, you should let us know.

Specifically, FSQS:

- Inspects meat and poultry, both fresh and processed, for wholesomeness;
- Monitors and tests meat and poultry products for harmful residues or food-poisoning bacteria;
- Inspects eggs and egg products for wholesomeness;
- Approves recipes and labels used for meat or poultry products;
- Establishes standards of identity for meat and poultry products. Standards of identity set specific (and optional)

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ingredients a food must contain--such as the kind and amount of meat, percent of fat or moisture, and additives, if any--when a product is to be labeled or identified by a common product name such as "beef with gravy" or "spaghetti with meatballs."

-Establishes grade standards and provides a food grading service in which FSQS graders assess the quality level of a given food and apply the USDA grade mark;

-Purchases commodities for USDA food assistance programs.

Here are examples of some of the specific problems FSQS can respond to: A foreign object (such as a piece of metal or an insect) in meat or poultry products; illness resulting from eating a product containing meat or poultry; an inaccurate depiction of the product on its label; swollen or burst cans containing meat or poultry; "off" odor or taste in a product containing meat or poultry; poultry labeled Grade A that is full of pin feathers and not well filled out; frozen green beans labeled Grade A that are full of stems and leaves; rancid-tasting butter labeled Grade AA that was used before the date embossed on the carton.

FSQS also wants to answer your general questions about our programs and policies and to provide you with information about subjects such as food additives and labeling standards.

How To Complain

In the case of suspected food poisoning related to meat or poultry, contact your physician or local health authority immediately. They will contact FSQS which will investigate thoroughly.

All complaints about specific products should contain the following information:

-Your name, address, and both home and work telephone numbers.

-An explanation of your complaint.

-The establishment code number from the product's container (only for meat and poultry products). All inspected meat and poultry products have an official establishment number which identifies the processing plant. This number is located either in the inspection legend (the round symbol with the letters USDA inside) or on the packaging. On cans or frozen food trays, this number is embossed into the metal. On bacon, it's on the end flap. On meat products, it is preceded by "EST" and on poultry products by the letter "P."

-The entire label from the product, if possible. If this is not possible, send the name of the product and any other information from the label.

-The name and location of the store where you purchased the product and the date on which you purchased it.

Sources Of
Information

FSQS has jurisdiction over meat and poultry products. For information about other food issues, check your telephone directory for the local listings for the following:

Food products not containing meat or poultry: Food and Drug Administration;

Suspected false advertising: Federal Trade Commission;

Sanitation of restaurants and food stores: Local health authorities;

Products made and sold exclusively within a State: Local or State Health Department or similar law enforcement agency.

For more information about FSQS programs, publications, and consumer education materials, write:

Information Division, Food Safety and Quality Service, Rm. 3606-S, USDA, Washington D.C. 20250, or any of these regional offices:

Atlanta

1718 Peachtree St., NW, Rm. 206
Atlanta, GA 30309
(404) 881-4154

Chicago

536 S. Clark St., Rm. 635
Chicago, IL 60605
(312) 353-3631

Dallas

1100 Commerce St., Rm. 5C40
Dallas, TX 75242
(214) 767-0094

New York

26 Federal Plaza, Rm. 1653
New York, NY 10278
(212) 264-1145

San Francisco

630 Sansome St., Rm. 702
San Francisco, CA 94111
(415) 556-6464

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